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ON PAGE C 22

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JACK ANDERSON

Salvadoran Rebels Given Military Edge

Just before leftist guerrillas began their long-heralded "final offensive" in El Salvador, American intelligence analysts had concluded the rebels had enjoyed a slight edge over the moderate junta's armed forces.

Here's how they reached that conclusion:

- Approximately 5,000 to 6,000 guerrillas oppose some 16,000 government and right-wing paramilitary troops. But being outnumbered three to one is not a desperate situation for dedicated guerrilla fighters. During the Nicaraguan civil war, the Sandinista rebels had at most about 6,000 well-trained fighting men and women. President Anastasio Somoza had 12,500 crack U.S.-trained troops at the outset, and increased his army to at least 16,000 as the war dragged on. Yet Somoza lost.

- The Salvadoran leftists are better equipped for the kind of war that is being fought — hit-and-run raids designed to destabilize the government and paralyze the nation's economy. The CIA has determined that among the leftists' arms are U.S. infantry weapons captured in Vietnam. In addition, the Cubans and Palestinians — and possibly the North Koreans — have been supplying arms to the rebels by way of Costa Rica. Iraq has given financial aid.

The Sandinistas have reportedly repaid a \$1 million loan from Salvadoran leftists by providing 4,500 top-line semiautomatic rifles — still packed in

factory grease — which Somoza left behind when he fled.

- The Salvadoran rebels have received excellent training from the Sandinistas and other tough, successful guerrilla fighters.

All this has led to a changed situation in recent months. "A year ago, the guerrillas and the government were about even militarily," an intelligence source told my associates Dale Van Atta and Bob Sherman. "But now the guerrillas have the edge."

Other sources, while not disputing the intelligence estimates of the guerrillas' strength, caution this should not lead the Reagan administration to rush millions of dollars in U.S. arms and aid to the embattled centrist regime and the right-wing paramilitary groups. A return to gunboat diplomacy will damage the U.S. position in Latin America, they warn.

The pressure will be on President Reagan to take action, however. Since the coup that toppled President Carlos Humberto Romero on October 15, 1979, factional violence has claimed more than 10,000 lives in El Salvador — and six of these were Americans.

The circumstances of the Americans' murders were particularly inflammatory: Three nuns and a Catholic woman lay worker were raped and either shot or strangled in December, their bodies dumped into a shallow grave.

Earlier this month, two American

agricultural advisers were executed by gunmen in the coffee shop of the Sheraton Hotel in downtown San Salvador. The two men worked for the foreign service arm of the AFL-CIO, and their bosses had asked the Agency for International Development to provide armored cars for their protection — a request AID officials turned down for lack of funds.

Intelligence sources laid responsibility for the Catholic women's murders on right-wing, paramilitary forces; it has not been determined who killed the two labor representatives. In any case, no one has been charged with a single one of the 10,000 political killings in the past 15 months.

The leftist guerrillas announced weeks ago — following the Republicans' victory in the American elections — that they planned to take over El Salvador before Reagan's inauguration. They clearly believe Reagan will respond to their growing threat by arming the right wing, and they hoped to present him with a fait accompli by inauguration day.